The Capital Times ■ Monday, Oct. 11, 1993

■ UP CLOSE

Rob Zaleski

Is JFK shooting really solved?

Zaleski

Finally.

After enduring 30 years of some of the wildest assassination theories imaginable — theories that fingered everyone from Jimmy Hoffa to Col. Mustard in the pantry with a revolver — the American public has learned the truth about who killed John F. Kennedy.

It was Lee Harvey Oswald and Lee Harvey Oswald alone, says Gerald Posner, a one-time Wall Street lawyer whose new book, "Case Closed," is being hailed as the definitive investigative account of what really happened on that grim day in Dallas three decades ago.

In fact, the response from critics has been so overwhelmingly positive that some historians are suggesting it's time for many Americans to give up their obsession with the assassination and get on with their lives.

What's a confused public to think?

(Which, to be sure, would be a major relief to millions of other Americans whose bodies go numb at mere mention of the name "Kennedy.")

The book — one of 10 out or due out this fall, just in time for the 30th anniversary of the shooting — hit the nation's bookstores just three weeks ago and already ranks No. 8 on the New York Times' best sellers list.

U.S. News and World Report devoted nearly an entire issue to the book and unabashedly declared that Posner, 39, had achieved the unprecedented.

"He sweeps away decades of polemical smoke, layer by layer, and builds an unshakable case against JFK's killer," it oozed.

Author Jeffrey Toobin, reviewing for the Chicago Tribune, called it "utterly convincing in its thesis, which seems, in light of all that has transpired over the past 30 years, almost revolutionary."

And Stephen Ambrose, the distinguished University of Wisconsin alumnus and biographer of Nixon and Eisenhower, calls the book "absolutely flawless" and says it should, in fact, put an end to the who-killed-JFK controversy once and for all.

"I don't know the guy (Posner), I've got nothing at stake here," Ambrose said in a phone interview from Rutgers University, where he teaches a course on the Cold War.

"But this is a wonderful, fabulous book. He has meticulously taken every point and broken it down and examined it thoroughly.

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Has JFK assassination really been solved?

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"And I think he's proven beyond a doubt that Oswald acted alone."

As for those who might remain skeptical, Ambrose groaned.

"Yeah, and you can still find people who believe the Earth is flat," he said. "I'd like to see a law passed where nobody is allowed to write or publish another book (on the assassination) unless they've taken an exam to prove they understand the facts."

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That would be fine with David Wrone, the acerbic, crotchety, highly regarded history professor at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point — and one of the country's foremost experts on the JFK assassination.

And the first person he'd have take the exam is Gerald Posner.

Yeah, that's right. Wrone remains a skeptic.

And he's livid.

He not only thinks "Case Closed" is inaccurate, but that it borders on a "major hoax."

It is, he said in a phone interview, "the worst piece of trash ever to walk down the road." And, as a scholarly investigative work, "it ranks right up there with Hitler's diaries."

What's more, it makes his blood boil, he said, that so many critics — Ambrose included — have been "suckered."

Then again, he noted, Ambrose is a biographer, not an assassination expert. And he obviously hasn't done the "nitty-gritty grunt work" that's necessary to expose such a "sloppy, reckless" work as Posner's.

"Why don't you call a carpenter over in Finland and get his opinion about Posner's book?" he said. "He'd have as much credibility on the subject as Ambrose does.

"I think Ambrose must have met some Hare Krishnas at the airport."

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What in particular does Wrone take issue with?

Pick a page, any chapter, and you're bound to find something, he said.

For example, Posner wrote that Oswald walked quickly into the Texas Book Depository building that fateful day, carrying his rifle in a brown package, disguised as curtain rods.

"That's false. It's just not true," Wrone said.

Warren Commission documents state that a depository employee named Jack Doherty came to work about 7 a.m. that day and sat at a table and went about his job of watching who entered the building.

"Doherty said under oath, twice, that Oswald entered the building empty-handed," Wrone said. "And that's the only evidence that exists on that particular point.

"There is no other."

Posner, Wrone says, omits any mention of that.

It is one of countless omissions throughout the book.

"I could go on and on."

Posner tries to build a case that Oswald was, in fact, on the sixth floor when the shooting occurred. To the contrary, Wrone says, most evidence suggests Oswald was exactly where he says he was — in a second floor lunchroom getting a Coke.

Critics were most impressed by Posner's contention that the same so-called "magic" bullet did, in fact, hit both Kennedy and Texas Gov. John Connally.

Posner cites frame 224 of the famous Zapruder film that shows the right lapel of Connally's suit flying away from his chest, moments after Kennedy was hit.

Well, fine and dandy, Wrone says.

Except there's one problem. The bullet hole in Connally's jacket was in the cloth to the right of the lapel — not in the lapel itself.

"So for (Posner) to say this proves the 'magic' bullet theory is a bald-faced lie. It's unbelievable."

Wrone says he's challenged Posner to a debate, but has yet to hear from him. He doubts that he will.

"I talked to him several times while he was researching the book," Wrone said, "and like a lot of people he interviewed, I've got some great tales to tell. But that's another subject.

"I mean, the guy's a former Wall Street lawyer. That's your first tip-off."

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So what's a confused public to think?

Well, it should keep in mind that no one has yet to come forth with a "single shred of solid evidence" that Oswald shot Kennedy, Wrone says.

And probably never will.

At the same time, Wrone says, there's another book due out this winter by Harold Weisberg — one of the few assassination critics Wrone admires — which may provide some clues.

"It doesn't tell who killed JFK, but it will give people a pretty good idea of who organized the conspiracy."

Posner, Wrone suggests, should get the first copy.